

## Argentina polarized over Army's role

by Cynthia Rush

In the aftermath of the late-January terrorist assault on a Buenos Aires army base, Argentine President Raúl Alfonsín's five-year effort to dismantle the institution of the armed forces is in trouble. Faced with the emergence of Soviet-backed narco-terrorism, spokesmen for a variety of political tendencies, including the military itself, are demanding that the Armed Forces be given a major role in combating subversion.

This is not at all to the liking of the U.S.-based Project Democracy apparatus, and its co-thinkers among the international social democracy which have backed Alfonsín's government. In the "New Yalta" accords now afoot between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., there is no place for independent national institutions or political movements capable of rallying popular forces in defense of a nation's interests. Argentina's volatile economic and political situation makes the destruction of the military, whose nationalist factions have historically allied with nationalists from other political parties, all the more urgent.

Since his 1983 election, the Argentine President has acted systematically to separate the Armed Forces from any involvement in activities related either to national economic development or internal security. The National Defense Law, passed in 1987, defines the Armed Forces' role as defending Argentina only from "external aggression" and prohibits it from dealing at all with "internal security."

However, in the wake of the Jan. 23 assault on the La Tablada military base by an internationally backed and well-armed guerrilla squad, there is a growing clamor that the law be changed. Sen. Leopoldo Bravo of San Juan province has introduced a bill to modify the law, and allow the Armed Forces to participate in anti-terrorist activities. The current law, Bravo explains, "has revealed its serious flaws, which place at unquestionable risk the security of the nation's inhabitants."

The Feb. 15 edition of the Buenos Aires daily *La Nación* warned, "No one wants a State with its hands tied by mistaken laws or an Armed Forces reduced to the role of helpless spectators in the face of 'internal' commotion, whose unquestionable purpose is to subvert the constitutional order

and democratic regime, and which is the equivalent of 'external' aggressions similar to a war according to classical principles."

Evidence that the La Tablada incident was no aberration, but part of a broader narco-terrorist capability, has exacerbated factional differences within the Alfonsín government. Officials tied to the international Social Democracy, such as Foreign Minister Dante Caputo, are minimizing proof of direct Nicaraguan and Cuban involvement in the terrorist attack, ridiculously trying instead to implicate Panama's Gen. Manuel Noriega. Interior Minister Enrique Nosiglia, who has been linked to the All for the Fatherland Movement (MTP), whose members attacked La Tablada, insists there is no danger of a terrorist upsurge in the country.

However Vice President Víctor Martínez, who speaks for a more conservative faction of the ruling UCR, publicly defends the right of military intelligence services to be involved in "political investigation," which is currently prohibited by the National Defense Law.

From outside Argentina, the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), one of Project Democracy's assets which intervenes in the internal affairs of other nations, has applauded Alfonsín's anti-military policies. In December of 1988, at the very moment that the MTP and former guerrillas from Argentina's People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) were preparing their terrorist assault, the NDI sponsored a conference in Santo Domingo entitled, "Civil Military Relations: the Argentine Experience," to discuss future steps to further rein in the country's Armed Forces.

According to recently published conference proceedings, participants argued that "the traditional role of the military must change . . . they must accept civilian control of domestic security and intelligence-gathering." Democracy, the proceedings explain, "demands of the Argentine military nothing less than a fundamental reassessment of its purpose and place in the country." Much praised was Alfonsín's "leadership" in establishing civilian control over the Defense Ministry, the state intelligence service (SIDE), the National Defense School, and in reducing the defense budget "in response to other national needs." Attendees considered as primary the passage of an amendment to the military code which allows prosecutors to appeal decisions reached by military judges to civilian courts.

Investigations into the La Tablada incident show that a terrorist movement linked to drug-trafficking networks in Central America has more than a foothold in the country. Argentina's drug trade has increased enormously over the past five years. Nonetheless, in their concern for preserving "democracy," the Santo Domingo NDI conference concluded that the Argentine Armed Forces should *not* be allowed to participate in a war on drugs. If given a mandate to investigate drug trafficking, NDI warns, the Argentine military would surely use it "as an excuse for seeking to exercise broad control over Argentine society."